Editorial Framing and Policy Feedback: How Nigerian Newspapers Shaped Public Resistance to the Ruga Settlements Policy

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Abstract

The Rural Grazing Area (RUGA) policy aimed to curb farmer/herder clashes in Nigeria. However, it received widespread criticism from stakeholders including the media which have the mandate to shape public perceptions on policy framework. Previous studies on RUGA have concentrated on public perception and stakeholders' biases with limited scholarly understanding of how Nigerian newspapers editorially framed the policy. This study entitled 'Editorial Framing as Policy Feedback: How Nigerian Newspapers Shaped Public Resistance to the RUGA Settlements Policy' analyses editorial positions of Nigerian newspapers on RUGA, examining Southern and Northern perspectives. The study interrogates how the selected Nigerian newspapers used editorials to project the RUGA policy. The mixed method approach of quantitative and qualitative content analysis was employed using quantitative to determine the frequency of the editorial and the qualitative to unravel the tone of the newspaper editorials. Six newspapers from the North and Southern blocs were made use of viz—The Guardian, The Nation, and Punch for the Southern bloc and Daily Trust, Leadership and Blueprint for the Northern bloc with Gofman's Framing Theory as the theoretical framework. The study found that editorials were largely critical (50%), with 30% neutral and 20% supportive. It also discovered that Southern newspapers were more critical, while Northern papers discussed related issues indirectly, which showed ethnic biases in editorial dispositions. The study recommends that editors should play developmental roles, detaching from biases. The study's findings also highlight the polarized nature of the RUGA policy.

Keywords: RUGA, editorial disposition, framing, herdsmen, policy

Introduction

The Rural Grazing Area – RUGA was a federal policy designed to settle herders in a grazing reserve area aimed at curbing incessant farmer/ herder clashes in Nigeria. RUGA is a word (from the Hausa or Fulani language) that means "cow settlement" or "human settlement". The idea according to the government was primarily conceived as part of the desired solution to the raging farmers/herders' clashes, which had succeeded in polarizing the nation. The Federal government in introducing the policy had thought it would go a long way to stop the migratory herders from perching on other people's farmland, thereby contributing to end the killing that usually resulted. Ebisi & Olisa (2020). However, the intervention received widespread criticism from stakeholders, including the media which have the mandate to shape public perception on policy framework, especially as it concerns governance.

Previous Studies by Ekpo and Tobi (2019); Oluka, Ailende and Efeosa- Temple (2019); Sayedi and Ndagi (2019); Agbakwuru and Awujo (2020); Ebisi and Olisa (2020); Galadima and Abana (2020 worked on the RUGA policy focusing on public perceptions, stakeholders' engagements, socio-economic context of RUGA among others, with limited scholarly understanding of how Nigerian newspapers editorially framed the policy. This represents a conspicuous gap in knowledge. This study therefore investigates how

selected Nigerian newspapers' editorials framed the RUGA policy. This study answers this research question: In what ways did the selected Nigerian newspapers used editorial to project RUGA initiative?

Methodology/ Theoretical Framework

The study made use of Erving Goffman's Framing theory (1974) which is the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue. (Chong& Druckman, 2007). The tenets of framing theory is such that the media focuses attention on certain events and then places them within a field of meaning. In essence, framing theory suggests that how something is presented to the audience (called "the frame") influences the choices people make about how to process that information. The framing theory is most appropriate for the study because it provided a lot of insights into how the policy was framed through the newspaper editorials which invariably determined how the policy was perceived and received by members of the public. In terms of methodology, the study made use of a mixed method of qualitative and quantitative content analysis looking at the frequency of the report as well as contextualizing the editorials by examining the languages, tones and mood of the editorials. Six newspapers including *The Nation*, *The Guardian*, *Punch*, for the Southern bloc and *Daily Trust*, *Leadership* and *Blueprint* for the Northern bloc were made use of with the aid of a coding sheet.

Data Presentation

Disposition of Newspaper Editorials to RUGA Policy

Table 1: Disposition of editorials

		Frequency	Percent
Disposition	Supportive	2	20
	Critical	5	50
	Neutral	3	30
	Total	10	100.0

In particular, the tones of the 10 editorials that were published were largely critical. At 50% (5 editorials), the majority had a critical disposition. Thirty percent were neutral (3 editorials). Just two editorials, or 20%, expressed support.

Table 2: Editorial disposition of individual newspaper

	Newspaper					
	Nation	Daily Trust	Leader-ship	Blue-print	Guardian	Punch

Editorial disposition	Supportive		0	0	0	1	1	0
			0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.4%	1.2%	0.0%
	Critical		3	1	0	1	0	0
			4.3%	1.2%	0.0%	1.4%	0.0%	0.0%
	Neutral		1	0	1	1	0	0
			1.4%	0.0%	1.2%	1.4%	0.0%	0.0%
	Not applicable		66	82	81	70	82	79
			94.3%	98.8%	98.8%	95.9%	98.8%	100.0%
Total			70	83	82	73	83	79
		100.0	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Source: Field Report, 2025.

Interpretation of Table 2: Editorial dispositions of individual newspaper

The table is stark. Out of 470 total stories, 460 — ranging from 94.3% in The Guardian to 100% in Blueprint— were coded "Not applicable" for editorial disposition. That means nearly all coverage across the six papers was straight news, with no clear institutional stance taken in editorials. Only 10 stories total carried a discernible disposition: 2 supportive, 5 critical, and 3 neutral. The Guardian was the most "critical" with 3 stories or 4.3%, plus 1 neutral. Daily Trust spread its few dispositions across all three: 1 supportive 1.4%, 1 critical 1.4%, 1 neutral 1.4%. Leadership had 1 supportive 1.2% and nothing else. The Punch had 1 critical 1.2%. The Nation had just 1 neutral 1.2%. Blueprint took no editorial position at all — 100% "Not applicable. This is agenda-setting by omission. First-level agenda-setting happened through news volume, but second-level agenda-setting collapsed. Editorials are where newspapers frame, interpret, and assign responsibility. With 97.9% of stories lacking any editorial disposition, the press refused to tell readers how to think about RUGA. Gatekeeping was extreme at the opinion level — the gates were closed. Framing contests were abandoned. On the professional front the numbers scream editorial caution and risk aversion. Writing an editorial means the institution owns a position. With RUGA tied to land, ethnicity, and federal power, newsrooms clearly dodged that liability. "Not applicable" at 94.3% to 100% shows editors treated RUGA as too hot for the institutional voice. Blueprint's 100% suggests a pure news-service model or fear of backlash. The Guardian's 4.3% critical shows slightly more willingness to editorialise, but even that is minimal. The job of interpretation was outsourced to sources, not assumed by the paper. On the social front, the public got

no consistent moral or policy compass from the press. Editorial pages shape elite debate and signal what "serious" people think. With only 10 dispositional pieces across six papers, readers were left to interpret RUGA on their own or through social media and talk radio. The absence of supportive editorials means government got no institutional press backing. The absence of critical ones means government got no sustained press heat. Neutrality at 0.6% overall means papers wouldn't even referee. This vacuum feeds polarisation because partisan actors fill the interpretive gap. On the policy impact, editorials drive policy because they speak for the institution. At 2 supportive and 5 critical total, RUGA faced no real editorial pressure or endorsement. In the overall analysis, the Nigerian press reported RUGA but refused to judge it. With 94.3% to 100% of coverage carrying no editorial disposition, the institutional voice went mute. Papers gave Nigerians facts without verdicts, coverage without conviction. On RUGA, the editorial page was not a forum — it was an empty room.

Editorial Dispositions through the tone of newspaper editorials.

In particular, the tones of the editorials that were published were largely critical. At 50% (5 editorials), the majority had a critical disposition. Thirty percent were neutral (3 editorials). Just two editorials, 20%, expressed support. It must also be noted that apart from the five editorial that are critical and addresses RUGA policy directly, few others that are said to be supportive are not directly related to RUGA as would be pointed out in this analysis. The tone of The Guardian newspaper on RUGA (Rural Grazing Area) policy for instance was largely critical. The paper viewed the policy as a potentially divisive federal land-grabbing scheme that favored Fulani herders. In one of The Guardian Editorial entitled Cancel This RUGA Threat Now, the critical tone was obvious. Even from the headline, The Guardian viewed RUGA as a threat and not in any way as an attempt to solve any problem..

> The public outrage, which followed the Federal Government's plan to surreptitiously seize lands from constituent parts of the Nigerian nation to feed the business drive of Fulani herdsmen, has been quite instructive in intergroup relationship. ------The Guardian, July, 2019.

In another editorial with the title Presidential Courage on RUGA Challenge, The Guardian was also very critical of the government's handling of the RUGA issue and security in Nigeria. The Guardian observed that the Federal government's move to create a Radio station for the herders and the overriding impression that the government is trying to foist the RUGA settlements scheme on the people is a major challenge, while also stating that the overall body language of the President it described as Presidential silence on the threat to national unity and alleged Fulanisation of the nation is a misnomer which must be looked into. It infers that a nation's leader should be able to strike a balance and reach a consensus to avoid anarchy. It largely believes that the government is grossly bias on the issue and criticises what it described as lack of effective action against the Fulani violence activities, expressing strong concern about national cohesion.

The Guardian's position on the issue was represented through the quotes below:

> President Muhammadu Buhari has explained that he feels pained by the level of banditry and deaths in the country, he has been perceived to be soft on handling this sin-

> gular cause of national instability and angst. "Has the Federal Government showed enough sensitivity to the issues on the ground?" Why has it been impossible for the president or indeed the Federal Government to chastise or send law enforcement agents after the Fulani brigands? – The Guardian Editorial, July 2019

The Guardian also criticised the security architecture of the country which it described as a skewed arrangement in favour of one section over the other as reflected in the quotes below:

> The security architecture of the country that is skewed in favor of one section of the country is too insular and socially incestuous and could lead to unintended consequences "The Federal Government seems to be inept, overwhelmed and confused." The presidential directive that all licensed arms should be returned with no effort to disarm the murderous Fulani herdsmen is a cause for concern (The Guardian Editorial, July 2019.).

The Guardian also in a third editorial piece entitled Enforce the Ban on Cattle Movement Now followed the same pattern of criticism. The paper in the editorial was supportive of the ban on cattle movement and was critical of the government handling of the entire issue saying the ban was a necessary measure to address the security concerns and violence precipitated by the farmers/herders crisis, while urging the federal government to consider an alternative solution such as ranching to address the issue. It particularly expressed frustration with the Federal government's in-effectiveness in addressing the issue. The tone of the article was generally critical of the RUGA issue and supportive of the Federal government's move to ban cattle movement. The position of The Guardian on the Editorial is encapsulated in the quotes below:

> The Federal Government seems to have run out of idea to curb the menace of RUGA (Rural Life-stock) Settlement, is an initiative which was roundly rejected by various Nigerian communities. The central policing system in which an individual dictates policing policy and implementation from Abuja is an anachronism from the days of military misadventure in government. The Federal Government seems to be inept, overwhelmed and confused. The narrative that the Federal Government is soft on Fulani herdsmen must be dispelled with vigour (The Guardian Editorial, September 2019).

Punch in an editorial entitled: "Herders Terrorism: Explosive RUGA Settlement Option", also presented a highly critical position of the Federal government handling of the RUGA narrative. It describes the move as a provocative undertaking and a wrong diagnosis of problem and solution while describing the Federal government as a defender of the herders'

In an editorial with the title Irregular RUGA, The Nation another South West Newspaper also saw the policy as a device by the Federal government to establish Fulani colonies all over the county, saying the policy which was divisive should be scrapped as it was s not the solution to the present challenges

> The furor and resentment generated by the proposal of the federal government to establish in different states of the federation, the Rural Grazing Areas settlements, otherwise known by the sinister name of RUGA. Added to all these now, is the ill-conceived proposal by the present federal government to introduce all over the country cattle colonies where herdsmen would settle. Many people especially in the south felt

> that it was a device by the government to establish Fulani autonomous colonies all over the country. RUGA wrapped with all the embellishments by the federal government is divisive and irregular and should be scrapped in its entirety. Establishment of colonies for the herdsmen throughout the country is not the solution. The federal government should start to take interest also in the problems facing other ethnic groups in the country. (The Nation, July, 2019)

Also, in an editorial comment entitled: "The RUGA Fumble" by The Nation, the paper criticized the Federal government's handling of the RUGA issue, saying the government roll out of the programme was poorly managed and lacked transparency and as such led to widespread misunderstanding and resistance. The Nation also shared similar sentiments by other newspapers in their editorials to the effect that the Federal government was favoring the Fulani herders and ignoring the concerns of other communities. It also criticised the government perceived silence and lack of engagement with the people as an attitude that build mistrust and exacerbate crisis. The Nation represented its views thus:

> The RUGA rollout was badly botched, and has probably been so bungled that it is beyond redemption. The president's seemingly nonchalant attitude in Aso Rock makes it easy for his political archenemies to convince their people that the plan is now brazenly and unapologetically coming to fruition. The government's silence and lack of engagement with the public have exacerbated the situation and created mistrust. The template is simple: The tribe starts a sustained campaign of anarchy. It foments chaos consistently. It daily destabilizes sections of the country. The cattle owners are not idiots. They are following the Niger Delta militants' template (The Nation Editorial Comment, July, 2019).

In similar vein, newspapers from the North also haad editorials devoted to the RUGA issue. Some of the editorials though had link with the RUGA issue. For instance, Daily Trust, which had about three different editorials written on the issue, wrote on Northern Elders Forum's quit notice to herders which was part of the fall -out of the farmer/herders clashes and the entire RUGA issue. However, the editorial was not specifically based on RUGA. Instead, the editorial criticised NEF's statement saying such inflammatory statement could precipitate tension. It also played up the essence of peaceful co-existence to enhance national unity. The editorial's tone suggested that Ruga was a divisive issue and that NEF's statement could exacerbate tensions. The impulse of the message contained in the Editorial was presented through quote as follows:

> Rather than protect the herders, this ill-considered call endangers not only them but the whole country because it could unleash a series of events that could spin out of control" NEF's response to those vile reactions was equally cruel, insensitive and self-defeating because it could, in a backhand manner, help the rabble rousers to achieve their nefarious aim…The Southwest Governors Forum described NEF's call as 'unfortunate, divisive and retrogressive'. -Daily Trust Editorial, May, 2019

In another editorial, Daily Trust writing under the title ''Fulanisation and Islamisation wrote about the controversy over Islamisation and Fulanisation, with particular reference to President Olusegun Obasanjo's statement. The Editorial was critical of former President Olusegun Obasanjo's comments on the RUGA issue and the government's handling of security. The paper described Obasanjo's statement as divisive and mis-

chievous. It also described the stand of the Buhari's government from blaming opposition on the nation's security challenges as ridiculous. The editorial although specifically based on Obasanjo's vituperation also made reference to the RUGA policy describing it as provocative and a long-running menace being dressed in a new name. It also highlighted the Buhari's government failure to address insecurity asserting the government has constituted itself as the boldest defender of herders.

> His recent attacks on the North are suspected to be born out of his fallout with President Muhammadu Buhari."Obasanjo should not have used his soured relationship with Buhari to torpedo Nigeria's national unity*: "Obasanjo should not have used his soured relationship with Buhari to torpedo Nigeria's national unity. The solution to settling his quarrel with Buhari does not rest with bringing down Nigeria (Daily Trust Editorial, July, 2019).

Daily Trust in its editorial also threw a jab at the president on its handling of the security problem confronting the nation. It says:

> The Buhari regime, too, should stop its ridiculous blaming of the opposition for the country's security problems" (Daily Trust Editorial, July, 2019).

Daily Trust also wrote a third editorial which was also captured in this article because it was indirectly related to RUGA. The editorial with the title Reducing Milk Importation is Timely was considered because it was one of the editorials written by the northern newspaper at a time when the RUGA issue controversy was raging. The editorial addressed the Central Bank of Nigeria's decision to restrict foreign exchange for milk importation with the aim of boosting local production and save the nation considerable foreign currencies. The CBN according to the article cite the nation's potential for milk production especially through initiative such as National Livestock Transformation Plan, which was directly related to RUGA.

> A meeting ground between the polar positions of the interests is the NLTP which so far provides the most acceptable path adopted by the National Economic Council [NEC] towards the end of 2018.

Leadership another Northern newspaper also wrote an editorial on the RUGA policy entitled RUGA and national Integration, where the paper argued in favour of the policy and condemned divisive statements by prominent leaders, while calling on the government to ensure national integration while trying to implement the policy.

Discussion of Findings

The overriding view on the dispositions of editorials to the RUGA policy was to the effect that newspaper editorials were largely critical on the issue of RUGA. In particular, the tones of the 10 editorials that were published were largely critical. At 50% (5 editorials), the majority had a critical disposition. Thirty percent were neutral (3 editorials). Just two editorials, or 20%, expressed support. Also, the editorial board of the South-West newspapers denoted as the Lagos Press were more critical of the RUGA policy as reflected in the title, tone and languages of their editorials. For instance, The Guardian in the four editorials attributed to it was critical of the RUGA policy. The tone of The Guardian editorial apart from being utterly critical also saw the Federal government as

playing a double game. It therefore did not only condemn the policy, but called for its outright cancellation, citing major security concerns and the need to foster national unity and cohesion. In the long run The Guardian as reflected in its editorial comments framed RUGA as a flawed, top-down policy. It contended that it was a policy that exacerbated Nigeria's deep-seated land and ethnic issues while at the same time advocating for decentralised, inclusive approaches instead of the RUGA approach which goes a long way to precipitate crisis. The implication of the Guardian position was that the RUGA scheme could exacerbate existing tensions and conflicts between different ethnic and cultural groups in Nigeria and that the scheme could lead to further instability and insecurity in the country. It also suggested that the government handling was a threat to the credibility of the government itself as it was capable of totally eroding its trust among the people.

On the other hand, the Northern newspapers as represented by Daily Trust, Leadership and Blueprint were less critical of the RUGA policy. The newspapers had less editorial space for the RUGA policy. Majority of the editorials attributed to the northern newspaper were not directed at dissecting the RUGA issue as the Southern newspapers. For instance, Daily Trust, which had more editorial space allocated, having three editorials in all did not actually focus directly on the RUGA narrative. Daily Trust order than facing the RUGA issue was addressing comments by notable leaders on the call by the Northern Elders Forum for herdsmen to return to the North and not directly picking on the RUGA issue. It only made reference to RUGA in passing, focusing on the issues that are related such as the Northern Elders' Quit Notice to herders. The second editorial was tagged as Fulanisation and Islamisation and this was also not directly based on RRUGA but a reaction to a statement made by Former President Olusegun Obasanjo at the time the controversy was raging. The article though more critical about Obasanjo's statement had less reference to RUGA.

The same scenario played out with the third editorial which was based on the Central Bank of Nigeria's ban on milk importation. The editorial was only considered because it had a slight relationship with the National Livestock Transformation plan, which was an off-shoot of RUGA. As others, the editorial was not also directly related to TUGA as it only discussed the potential for milk production. The last of the editorials from the northern blocs was that from the *Leadership*, which was based on fostering national cohesion. The article was supportive of the RUGA policy order than being critical. From the foregoing and based on the slant of editorials between the North and the South, it can be safely said that the South-West newspapers were more critical of the RUGA policy and government handling of the issue unlike their northern counterpart, which carefully chose issue to respond to on the RUGA controversy and ensured that their comments or statement on the criticism of the policy were not that sharp and pungent and were generally less-critical and in few instances supportive.

Conclusion

In conclusion, newspaper editorials in Nigeria were generally critical of the RURAL grazing Area (RUGA) policy. In this stead, the Southern Nigeria newspapers studied, represented by The Nation, Punch and The Guardian were more critical of the RUGA policy with The Guardian promoting more critical thoughts. On the other hand, the

Northern Nigeria newspaper were less critical and were more concerned about reacting to inflammatory comments that were seen to have the propensity to divide or put the country on flame. Majority of the Editorials by the Northern newspapers were not directly related to the RUGA policy as they only mentioned the policy in passing. The tone position and languages employed in projecting the policy especially by the Southern media were suggestive of criticism and condemnation of the policy. The newspapers just like the members of the public saw the policy as a deliberate attempt to inflame the already charged atmosphere, especially with the alleged intention of government to fund the private business of some ethnic group with state resources and a federal land-grabbing agenda. In other words, the newspapers never saw the policy as an economic possibility as projected and claimed by the government.

Recommendations

Considering the fact that the positions of the newspapers were not different from the views projected by members of the public, newspapers in Nigeria should learn to separate themselves from policy issue, so that their personal sentiments do not reflect in their reportage. The highly critical tones and dispositions of the Southern Nigeria newspapers on the RUGA policy was indicative of the fact that newspapers allowed ethnic sentiments to play out in their disposition. This was a negation of the role of an arbiter and impartial umpire the press is expected to play.

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